



WIELKOPOLSKA
REGION

WiSER – Women in Science and European Research

Event summary and key messages

The event **WiSER: Women in Science and European Research**, held virtually on 4th December 2020, served as a platform to discuss opportunities and challenges in implementing gender-balanced policy in academia and research culture. A particular attention was paid to current policies and instruments, like recent developments relating to the ERA and the forthcoming Horizon Europe. Also, it shed some light on the best practices fostering an institutional change in terms of strengthening the gender equality in European science and research. We hope that with the WiSER event we made a small step towards more gender-balanced scientific world!

The Event, organised by the **Polish Science Contact Agency 'PolSCA' of the Polish Academy of Sciences** and **Information Office of the Wielkopolska Region in Brussels**, was attended by over 150 participants from Poland and Europe, including individuals representing the scientific community (universities, research organizations or institutes of the Polish Academy of Sciences), research funding organizations and executive agencies as well as organizations dealing with the issue of gender equality in the context of research and innovation. An important group of participants were representatives of various R&I liaison offices based in Brussels.

On behalf of Maryia Gabriel, the EU Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture and Education, the Event was opened by a member of her cabinet, **Snezhina Petrova**, who emphasized the importance of issues related to women in science and research. At the same time, she raised the topic of the European Research Area, which supports the implementation of Gender Equality Plans (GEPs). These are intended to be a contributing factor to a positive change at the level of organizations participating in the research and innovation framework program. In addition, Ms Petrova indicated that the EU agenda will pay particular attention to two areas: countering gender-based violence in academia and integrating the gender dimension into research and innovation.

During the Event, moderated by Dr. Michał Matlak (EP), the speakers discussed in two thematic panels. The first panel, attended by Mina Stareva (EC), prof. Barbara Romanowicz (ERC) and dr Simona Isler (SNSF/AcademiaNET), was devoted to activities supporting women scientists in the context of European science policy. It was stressed that the forthcoming Horizon Europe will place a much greater emphasis on strengthening gender equality than before. The second panel, in which prof. Bogumiła Kaniewska (AMU), prof. Agnieszka Dobrzyń (Nencki Institute of PAS) and prof. Claudine Hermann (EPWS) took part, was dedicated to the exchange of experiences and views on empowering and engaging women in academic environment, and this part was very popular among the participants of the meeting.

The main issues, which were highlighted during both panel discussions, are presented below.

GENDER ACTION PLANS (GEPs) AND THE INTEGRATION OF GENDER DIMENSION IN RESEARCH AND INNOVATION CONTENT

- ✚ The gender strategy implemented in the ERA has been a driver for many positive changes at the Member State and European level but a persistent heterogeneity in terms of development of the gender dimension in R&I context remains. In the light of this, **the implementation of the Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) is strongly encouraged by [the European Research Area](#).**
- ✚ GEPs would become one of the **eligibility criteria** for the new Horizon Europe programme, which include the obligation for all the public organisations to have a Gender Equality Plan (GEP).
- ✚ It is crucial for the European Commission that every organisation is able to apply for funding, therefore this requirement will be introduced after 1-year transition period, which is thought to start in the second year of the calls for proposals.
- ✚ **Four minimum-criteria** will have to be filled by organisations in relation to the GEPs: (1) the plan has to be public and show the commitment of the top management (2) it has to have dedicated resources e.g. an office with responsibility to implement it (3) the plan needs to be evidence-based (4) it should mention types of activities that has already taken place to address gender balance.
- ✚ The Gender Equality Plans need to be inclusive. The notion of inclusiveness spreads over 3 levels: (1) opening gender equality to other topics linked to discrimination e.g. based on race, age, sexual orientation, disability or socio-economic status (2) involving the private sector and (3) ensuring a geographical balance.
- ✚ Capacity building measures, webinars and peer-review activities will be organized by EC to support all institutions and organisations in development of such plans. What is more, the EC wants to support institutions in its development by e.g. sharing practical tools.
- ✚ The templates for gender equality actions plans that can be adapted to needs of a specific institution are available on [the European Institute for Gender Equality](#) website.
- ✚ Due to **the positive correlation between institutions implementing GEPs and research excellence**, there is a broad support for the introduction of the Gender Equality Plans as a requirement in the future Horizon Europe programme.
- ✚ The second measure related to gender equality that will be a novelty in Horizon Europe is the integration of gender dimension in research and innovation content **by default**. It means that there would be not anymore gender flagged topics but **all R&I actions in Horizon Europe will in principle integrate sex and gender dimension**.

GRANT APPLICATIONS

- ✚ Although the success rates have been rather similar for both sexes, the difference in terms of the number of grant applications submitted by men and women is still noticeable. As it was stressed, this is the matter of great importance to guarantee by funding organisations equal opportunities for men and women.
- ✚ The challenges relating to the language describing men and women in resumes or reference letters were also pointed out. Female applicants tend to be more modest and to underestimate their achievements. Also, there is a tendency to question women's

independence related to their academic achievements. That is why concrete tools such as the ERC model CV template are needed.

- ✚ The promotion of women's successes in science and research is key to make them more proud of their achievements, and in consequence, to encourage more female researchers to apply for prestigious grants.
- ✚ There is also a need of equal, inclusive language, e.g. in grant calls, and more gender-balanced groups of peer-reviewers or in evaluation panels.

CHILDCARE AND HOUSE CHORES

- ✚ There is a variety of challenges that women face, including those related to unequal distribution of care or house chores between men and women as well as the accessibility of daycare facilities, also in relation to their prices. For instance, the lack of childcare facilities in Switzerland presents a real problem for female researchers.
- ✚ In the view of abovementioned, it is needed to provide young parents-scientists with the institutional support like dedicated daycare facilities at universities or in institutes. This is essential when it comes to improving the working conditions of early stage researchers, in particular women. It is worth adding that several such initiatives are already planned, however, due the COVID-19 pandemic, they have been put on hold.
- ✚ To support young mothers in academia, also specific measures should be undertaken by funding organisations. For example, ERC has implemented the 18-months eligibility extension for the ERC grants for young mothers or decided to reverse the order of the evaluation process (first the project, then the PI track record).
- ✚ It should be noted that the solutions for the childcare vary from country to country and therefore parents might face different challenges. What is more, the issues of gender equality – also in the context of the childcare – require a long-term approach.
- ✚ Hierarchical academic systems that are in place in some European countries are also obstacles in tackling gender inequalities in science and research across Europe. Long periods between PhD and professorships, fixed-term contracts and low salaries concern both men and women but the harassment that hierarchy can facilitate and motherhood-related duties aggravate the situation of female researchers.

THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON THE SITUATION OF WOMEN IN ACADEMIA

- ✚ The European Commission is looking into this impact on sex and gender and the response needed and explained that an external expertise had been requested to this aim. Also the projects that are in progress were asked to look into the issues related to the pandemic and report back to the EC. Moreover, **the EC is planning to launch a specific action on the impact of COVID-19 particularly on women researchers.**
- ✚ The ERC is well aware of the potential impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on female researchers, but the decision of how to handle the issues had not been taken yet. Less applications from women are to be expected in the forthcoming period as they have not had the possibility to prepare their portfolio, e.g. due to additional care-related chores, therefore the extensions of eligibility, similar to those related to motherhood, are presently considered.

THE NEED OF CONTINUITY OF DEDICATED INITIATIVES ON GENDER EQUALITY IN SCIENCE AND EUROPEAN RESEARCH

- ✚ All speakers agreed that the work on gender equality in science and European research has to be maintained and continued. The specific activities aiming to sensitise the science community to the issue of gender equality are necessary. It relates e.g. to raising awareness on gender bias at every level and monitoring of all the calls and statistics on gender balance.
- ✚ It is extremely important to continue and develop initiatives undertaken within the projects on gender equality, funded under the EU programmes, especially after the project funding ends.
- ✚ All workshops, webinars and events like WiSER, which allow for discussion on this topic, are very helpful and should be continued.